

THE DUTY
OF MAKING A
LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT;
A SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE CHAPEL

OF

ST. NICHOLAS, LYNN-REGIS,

Dorset,

JANUARY 6,

AND IN THE

PARISH CHURCHES OF

BOSTON AND WIGTOFT,

Lincolnshire,

JANUARY 20, 1799.

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THE BIBLE

THE NEW TESTAMENT

A SERMON

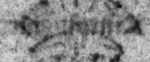
PREACHED IN THE CHURCH

BY NICHOLAS LYNN-BEES

OF THE

NORTH CHURCH OF

BOSTON AND WILTON T.



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ISAIAH, C. xxxviii. V. 1.

“ Thus saith the Lord,—Set thine house in order.”

THESE words are usually considered, and discoursed upon, in a moral and religious sense; as containing an injunction to make that preparation for death, which regards our *future* and *eternal* state. Doubtless, this is our principal concern; and ought to be the business of our whole life, as well as of the concluding part of it.

But the message in the text, delivered by the Prophet to Hezekiah, regarded his *worldly* concerns: “Set thine *house* in order”; or, as you read in the margin of your Bible,—*Give charge concerning thy house.*

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In this original sense I shall understand and treat these words in the following Discourse ; proposing to set before you *the Reasons* for having at all times your temporal affairs discreetly settled and disposed, by A
LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT.

If this subject can be treated more seasonably at one time than another, it may be so at the commencement of A NEW YEAR. At this time, prudent persons have generally examined their affairs ; and they are now especially enabled, by an exact knowledge of their substance, to determine in what manner, and in what proportions, it may best be distributed, if it should please God to take them away before another year arrives.

This is a duty of very great importance to the quiet of our own minds, to the peace of our families, and to the welfare of all those who are most dear to us in the world. And yet it is a duty so commonly deferred and neglected, that (I speak from good authorities) of persons possessing some property, nearly a third part die without any Testament
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at all; a great portion of the rest postpone this matter to their last sickness, and then do it very unadvisedly and imperfectly, signing their Wills with a trembling hand, in characters almost illegible; and the number of those who settle their affairs considerately, dispassionately, with the advice of persons duly skilled in these matters, and with such alterations from time to time, as a change of circumstances requires, is in proportion very small. Surely this is an argument which you will not resist, for the usefulness and necessity of discourses like the present:

THE FIRST and most obvious reason for making a last Will and Testament is, the uncertainty of health and life.

A messenger was sent on this subject from God to Hezekiah, and it was a gracious message; because it invited him to fulfil a necessary duty, while it was yet possible to fulfil it. If such a message was sent to any of us by our Creator, should we not feel an indispensable obligation to comply with it? Now, such a message is virtually sent to every
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one of us. For it is the voice of God, "Thou shalt surely die." One generation after another repeats the voice,—“Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” The decease of our neighbours and friends brings home to us continually the impression of our own mortality. We *feel* the sentence of death within ourselves. The seeds of disease are sown, and the language of increasing symptoms is, “Thou shalt die and not live.” Young persons are ready to admonish those who are advanced in life, that it is full time their Testament were made; and that if it be longer delayed, they are inexcusable. The admonition is just, and should be taken in good part. But, let not the young be offended, if we remind even *them*, that the strength in which they now rejoice, is no certain evidence that they have yet many years to live. The various accidents, dangers, and sicknesses, to which young persons are especially subject, and which quickly “change their countenance, and send them away;” and the many inscriptions, which
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we may read in our way to church, to the memory of those who died before the 30th year of their age;—all these should remind them strongly, that death moweth down all ages, and that nothing can secure us from his stroke.

A SECOND Reason for making your Testament while in health, is, that although there may be time for it in sickness, yet it is not so fit a time.

The powers of the mind are usually affected by the state of health of the body. Whoever has had experience of Sickness—(and who is there, that has not?) must know, that it is seldom a fit time for transacting business of any kind. That calm and deliberate attention, which is due to all important affairs, may be interrupted by pain, suspended by weakness, or disturbed by anxious thoughts, which are very apt to arise in the time of trouble. Perhaps, regret for having so long neglected to put his worldly affairs in order, may prove a source of great disquiet to the sick man. It is very painful

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to himself, and to his sympathising friends, that while the body is under trouble, the mind also must be disturbed about things of the world, at a time when it is so desirable, that the mind were free to cherish, without interruption, sentiments of Christian piety. And it is a circumstance, to which no one, surely, can look forward without pain, that, by reason of his own past negligence, his near relations, at the approach of his departure, instead of that undivided attention and sympathy which are due to a dying friend, may be chiefly anxious about the division of his property; and perhaps be disposed to bias his mind, enfeebled by distress, to make an improper distribution of it. Is it not incomparably better, that the arrangement should be fairly made before sickness comes; and that the affectionate intercourse of friendship be not mingled with, and embittered by, worldly cares and vexations?

Besides the effect of sickness upon the mind, and the danger of being importuned or biased at such a time, by interested, selfish persons;

persons ;—*the friend* who could give advice may probably be absent ; and the dying man, who has such a friend, would then very much regret his absence, and must regret it in vain. Let this consideration induce us to make the proper use of a real friend, while we are yet able to go to him, or to receive and converse with him deliberately. It is fit, indeed, in making a Testament, to follow the dictates of your own unbiaſſed mind ; but the very opening of your mind to ſuch a friend, is a means of forwarding this work ; and it may alſo be very uſeful, to correct any lurking reſentment or unjuſt prejudices, and to ſuggeſt ſome proper conſiderations that might otherwiſe eſcape you. It is only from a faithful friend that we can hope for good advice in this matter ; and it is one among the many reaſons for cultivating friendſhip. This intercourſe not only ſmooths and cheers the ordinary path of life, but aſſiſts in the difficult and painful ſteps of it. *Chriſtian* friends are not ſtartled and amazed at the thoughts and proſpects of death. *They* do not ſhrink from the ſubject,

like *Unbelievers* ; but calmly consult together about preparation for it, and comfort each other's heart by the view beyond it.

A THIRD Reason for setting our house in order while in health, is, that a different set of duties belong to the sick, enough to occupy the time of sickness ; and in which it is desirable for the departing Christian to be chiefly engaged ; such as patience, resignation, humbleness of mind, alienation from the world, charity, faith, and hope. The revelation of Divine Mercy through a Mediator, and of “ a rest that remains to the people of “ God,”—these are the objects to which his soul now turns, in which it finds refuge, and on which it loves to dwell. But if worldly business is yet to be settled, this must produce a most painful distraction of thought. When the sick man begins to think of a *future state*, then the thoughts of ordering his *temporal affairs* arise ; when he expects from the Minister of Religion words of *spiritual comfort*, the Minister of Religion has occasion to begin with the Prophet's message, “ Set thine
house

house in order;" and when he looks for kindness and sympathy from friends and attendants in his distress, they are urging him to make his Testament, and putting in their claims for his favour. The man who has much money, for which perhaps he was envied all his life, becomes, in this situation, an object of mere compassion.

A FOURTH Reason for making a Testament when in health, is, that there may then be room for *second thoughts*, in order to correct and perfect it. In all important concerns second thoughts are desirable. But in sickness we may neither have time, nor inclination, for much thought about worldly affairs. At the approach of death, the things of this world diminish in their apparent value; they are scarcely thought worthy of serious attention; they are transacted with reluctance and haste, and readily dismissed from the mind. Men are apt, at that time, to undervalue them, as much as they overvalued them before. Now the framing of a Will, while we are in health, tends to correct
both

both these extremes. It sets in their true light all worldly possessions; and we view them, not as a durable portion, but as a temporary provision; not as our own, but as committed to us in the way of *trust*; for the right disposal of which, both in life and at death, we must render an account to *Him* who gave them. And this view directs us both to the thankful enjoyment of what is committed to us, and to the right disposal of that part which we are likely to leave. Though worldly possessions be, in themselves, a small matter, yet, when considered as one of the subjects of our trial and probation, they acquire much importance; for, “if we have been unfaithful in the deceitful mammon, who will give us the true riches?”

A FIFTH Reason for making the Testament when in health, is, that it is then done with less painful reluctance than on a sick bed. The making a Will appears to a sick man the signal of death, and possibly gives a shock to his frame that may actually hasten it.

it. For however the suggestion may be softened, yet the very proposing to him a duty, on which he could never bring himself to think while in health, strongly indicates to his forboding mind, that he is looked upon as a dying man; and he is apt, in this situation, to adopt the sentiments of the spectators, and to despair. Whereas in health, though he may feel the usual reluctance, yet he has more strength of mind to overcome it; he can more easily reason himself out of the weak fancy, that the Testament is a signal of death; he is assisted by the love of life, and the expectation of its continuing, which in health are strong; he is then easily convinced, that for having made his *Will*, he shall not (as it is said) die a day the sooner; he can even be persuaded to take the use and comfort of what he has more freely, by the clear foresight that it is not his for ever.

It is no small recommendation of a Testament made in health, that it is then done not by constraint, but willingly. *Necessity* is laid upon a *dying* man, and his long delay shows that

that he grasps his possessions till he is forced to quit them ; while the voluntary deed of a man in health partakes of the nature of a free-will offering.

MY LAST argument for “ setting our house in order ” while in health, is, the *moral effect* of such transaction upon the *heart*.

One reason, for which men are so averse from making a Testament, is, that it looks like a farewell to the world, and a separation from it ; it presents to their imagination the things which they possess in the possession of others. But, if this be a reason why a Testament is delayed, it is at the same time a proof that we stand in need of such a salutary lesson. A solemn transaction, which impresses upon our minds the transitory nature of our tenure ; which *transfers* our interest in worldly things ; which anticipates the time when we shall “ give an account of our “ stewardship, and be no longer stewards ” ; — such a transaction tends to separate our hearts from the world, and to remind us that the things of it are not our chief good ; it warns

warns us, " to make to ourselves friends of
 " the mammon of unrighteousness ; that
 " when they fail, we may be received into
 " everlasting habitations."

It is related of a wise and good man of the
 last age, that he always kept a will executed,
 and renewed it yearly on his birth-day, with
 such alterations as circumstances required ;
 observing, " that it is good to do, at a *set*
 " *time*, what it is *necessary* to do at *some time*."

The altering and renewing of a Will, when
 circumstances change, is not only very right
 in itself, but also renews all the useful impres-
 sions of it. Perhaps there are no moments
 of our life, when we are more loosened from
 the world, than the moment of subscribing a
 Testament. The soul, amidst all its attach-
 ments to the world, requires such loosening ;
 that it may, the more easily and willingly,
 return unto its " rest." By executing a
 Will, attachment to worldly things is shaken.

" I have now determined (a man says to
 " himself) whose all *these things* shall be ;
 " but what is *my* portion ? My heart and
 C " strength

“ strength shall faint and fail, but *God* is the
 “ strength of my heart, and my portion for
 “ ever.”

Such are the Reasons (just, I hope, and convincing) for making a Testament while we are in health ; namely,—that the work may otherwise be left undone ; that sickness unfits the mind for doing it ; that there are other duties more suited to a sick bed ; that care and thought are bestowed, with especial propriety, on the last transaction of our life ; —that a voluntary is preferable to a constrained act of duty ;—and that the making of a Testament while in health, leaves very useful impressions on the heart.

THERE is another point, not foreign to this subject, but perhaps fit to be discussed in other places rather than this, and depending much upon peculiar circumstances ; I mean, the right *manner* of distributing our worldly substance ;—the *proportions* by which it should be divided amongst our Children or Relations.

ONE THING I AM SURE OF, THAT I AM WAVING

Waving therefore this point altogether, I shall conclude by setting before you one *prudential*, and one or two *moral* considerations, with regard to the making of a Testament.

The *prudential* consideration is this : Let it be done with the advice of those persons whose professional skill, and whose knowledge of the nature of your particular property, enable them to do it in the manner most agreeable to your own wishes. EXPENCE IS NEVER WORSE SAVED, THAN IN MAKING A WILL. This is a maxim, by no means calculated to promote the gains of the professors of the Law. For I believe it will hardly be disputed, that upon the whole they gain much more by the mistakes of other persons, intruding into their province in these cases, than by the exercise of their own knowledge.

The Laws of our country favour, indeed, the *intention* of a Testator, as far as it can be clearly discovered ; but there are limits be-

yond which they cannot go, and requisites with which they cannot dispense.

The *'moral* considerations which I have to set before you are these ;—the payment of all just debts ;—the restitution (as far as possible) of every thing gotten wrongfully ;—and the reparation of injuries committed.

The payment of just debts must be the dictate of every man's heart. Amidst cares, and pleasures, and worldly pursuits, the sense of justice may sometimes slumber ; but it awakens at the thought of death and judgment, which is apt to mingle with a Testament. When we are about to give “ an account of the deeds done in the body,” we must surely feel an obligation “ to render to all their due.” The conscience which is insensible in that hour, is “ seared as with a hot iron.”

Restitution also is necessary, and the Reparation of injuries committed.

This is perceived and felt, as we enter “ the valley and shadow of death.” A sense of guilt then presses upon the mind,
even

even upon minds that never admitted it before. The *thief* and the *murderer*, who seem to have forgotten God, are now forced to remember him. He that has gained any undue advantage by *swearing falsely*, trembles in the view of that tribunal, to which he made an impious appeal. He that has grown rich by *fraud* or *oppression*, is now “re-
 “ proved by his own iniquity ; and the rust
 “ of his silver burneth his flesh, as it were
 “ fire.” The *worldling*, who lives at ease in his possessions, and hardens his heart against the poor and needy, is now troubled and confounded by a voice from God, “ This
 “ night shall thy soul be required of thee ;
 “ and then, whose shall all these things be ? ”

The man who has lived in *criminal pleasures*, and has studied *Seduction* as an art, now perceives the disorder and misery which he has wrought in the earth. Innocence corrupted, peace of families destroyed, and fervent curses, uttered in the bitterness of wounded spirits, coming up before Him “ to whom
 “ vengeance

"Vengeance belongeth"; "all these pour
 out vials of wrath" into his conscience.

Men in health may continue to banish
 thought, by business, or amusements, or the
 repetition of guilt. They may soothe and
 deceive themselves by general views of Divine
 Mercy and Gospel Comfort, and by a vague
 half-formed purpose of repenting before they
 die. But all these excuses, and defences, and
 feeble purposes, and dangerous delays, and
 deceitful hopes, will fail; when light opens
 upon the soul, reflected from that throne
 which is beyond the vale,—the throne of
 JUSTICE AND JUDGMENT.

A dying Man often finds, notwithstanding
 the light which then opens upon him, that
 he must leave the concerns of his *Soul* in the
 same state in which sickness found them. It
 is one advantage of making a Testament
 while in health, that it leads us to anticipate
 the feelings of a death-bed while they can
 yet influence our conduct; and that it may
 prove a monitor to break off and to repair
 iniquities

iniquities and wrongs, and to keep our hearts right with God. Our first and truest wisdom is, "to keep a conscience void of offence," to abstain from doing any wrongs, of which we must one day repent, or else "die in our iniquities." The next degree of wisdom is, to make *reparations personally, and without delay*. But if these reparations have been delayed, a Testament will be the last means in our power of making them.

This part of the subject may be painful to them who have "walked in crooked ways," though it points out the method of recovering the right path; but to the upright man it is like meat and drink, for which he hungers and thirsts, to fulfil by his Testament the work of Justice.

FINALLY: See now, and consider, the excellency of THE GOSPEL. There are no subjects of preaching from which this reflection will not arise. The last transaction of life (concerning which we have discoursed) would be but little interesting; if our prospect
were

were bounded by the darkness, and destitution, and forgetfulness of the grave. Instead of anticipating the evil day, we should then rightly disregard the future, and consign to oblivion the past. It is *Immortality* "brought to light by the Gospel," that gives an importance, and interest, and dignity to the concluding scenes of life. Our concern is, not so much with temporal, as with eternal things. Temporal things derive their real importance, from the effect of our conduct here upon our state hereafter: and that importance is owing to the GOSPEL. Under its influence, we consider our life on earth, not merely as "a labour for the meat which perisheth;" but as a theatre for the exercise of justice, mercy, and truth; where we act in the sight of men, and angels, and God; with the certain assurance, that the part which we now act, will be judged at the last Day, before "the general assembly of just men, made perfect." The believer, therefore, feels a constant and most powerful motive,

"to

“ to live unto the Lord, and to die unto the
 “ Lord ;” throughout life, and at death, to
 be “ faithful in the few things” now com-
 mitted to his charge.

May we all be disposed to receive the words
 that have been spoken into honest and good
 hearts ! And may God, “ who giveth the
 increase,” render them fruitful !

THE END.

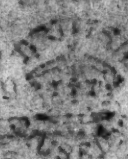
N. B. The greater part of this Discourse
 is extracted, with many additions and altera-
 tions, from a Sermon on the same subject, by
 Dr. Samuel Charters, Minister of Wilton, in
 North Britain. (Longman, 1794.)

See the British Critic, vol. vi, p. 308,
 where an extract of this kind is suggested.

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It is to be noted that the first of these is the most important, and the most difficult, of the three. It is the first, because it is the first step in the process of the formation of the new state. It is the most difficult, because it is the first step in the process of the formation of the new state. It is the first, because it is the first step in the process of the formation of the new state. It is the most difficult, because it is the first step in the process of the formation of the new state.

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M. B. The greater part of this Discourse is extracted, with many additions and alterations, from a sermon on the same subject, by Dr. Samuel Clarke, Minister of Wilton, in Northampton. (L. 1734.)

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